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A TOPOLOGY OF HOPE: UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, AND HETEROTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION

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ABSTRACT
This essay investigates how utopian thinking met with dystopian variations in contemporary Chinese science fiction. The dystopian gaze into the utopian dreams, the alternative histories contending with the utopian narratives, and the heterotopian experiments challenging ideological orthodoxy are the focus of my analysis. Reading the dystopian fiction by Chan Koonchung and science fiction stories and novels by Han Song, Bao Shu and Hao Jingfang etc., I do not intend to illustrate the utopian/dystopian interventions in the political sense, but rather to explore the vigorous, multifaceted variations of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia that these authors have created as discursive constructs to suggest alternatives to the utopia/dystopian dualism. Contemporary science fiction authors write back to the usual literary practice taking words as reflections of the world. To these writers, words are worlds.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese science fiction; utopia; dystopia; heterotopia; uchronia; alternative history

Introduction

The original "Utopia" in Thomas More's book is "a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial." (Fatima Vieira, 2010) Utopia is intended as a critique of certain social situations but leaves room for an imagined positive image that serves as a correction of the criticized society. Modern utopian thinkers locate the nonexistential ideal society not only across the geographically expanded globe but also in the future, thus creating "uchronia." Therefore, utopia can be everywhere in time and space against the expanding scope of the human imagination, which produces the perfect setting for science fictional world building. Darko Suvin considers science fiction to be "at least collaterally descended from utopia," a sort of niece of utopia, (Darko Suvin 1979, 61) and Frederic Jameson finds the utopian impulse in most of the genre. (Frederic Jameson 2005, 1–9) Utopia lends to science fiction an intellectual tendency to envision better alternatives to reality. Science fiction gives a modern look to the older, largely humanistic utopianism in terms of scientific, technological, and social advancements, and utopia – eutopia and euchronia – gives the science fictional representation of time

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and space a glamour evincing a greater hope invested in both scientific and political revolutions. But in the twentieth century, utopianism turned dark and cast dystopian shadows in science fiction, which has become a forefront literary genre questioning the modern visions of progress, the use or abuse of science and technology, the coercive society, and the prospect of a technologized future. Dystopian science fiction that contributed to the rise of anti-utopianism in the West after the World Wars and Stalinism is perhaps the rebellious "niece" that Suvin has in mind, who is ashamed of its utopian heritage (Darko Suvin 1979, 61) – but it cannot escape its genetic destiny, because even the darkest dystopian vision comes from the same utopian impulse, which inspires a subversion of society as much as it inspired utopianism in the first place.

Modern utopianism has existed in Chinese intellectual thinking for over a century. During the late Qing, Western utopian novels like Edward Bellamy's (1850–1898) *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888) were translated into Chinese (1890). Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) first translated the term "utopia" into Chinese (*wutuobang* 烏托邦) in his rendition of *Evolution and Ethics* (*Tianyanlun* 天演論, 1898), which popularized the concept among Chinese readers at the end of the nineteenth century. Around this time, Confucian utopias that combined modern civilization with Chinese morality began to emerge in the writings by the intellectuals under influences of modern utopianism, such as the reform-minded Confucianist Kang Youwei 康有為 (1857–1927). Kang's thought on "Datong" 大同 (the great unity) had a lasting impact on the later political leaders such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866–1925), and Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976), and utopianism has repeatedly motivated revolutionary efforts that aimed for a wide range of changes, including systematic reform of Chinese society and the Chinese mind.

What stays central to the Chinese utopian thinking is an overconfidence in evolutionism and an extravagant display of the splendor of forward historical progress – a sweeping optimism in pursuit of "the best in the best of all possible worlds," a mindset that David Der-wei Wang borrows from Voltaire and defines as Panglossianism. In historical hindsight, it should have always come together with another mode of thinking: the "dark consciousness," an anticipation of ominous, catastrophic events and a much broader worldview that includes both the best and the worst, or both utopia and dystopia. (David Der-wei Wang 2020b, 53–70)

The first notable Chinese dystopian novel is Lao She's 老舍 (1899–1966) Martian fantasy *Cat Country* (*Maochengji* 貓城記, 1933). Written right after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, *Cat Country* presents China's apocalyptic end, which the author claimed to intend as a moral lesson or a warning to the Chinese people. As if the worst scenario, upon being articulated, would not really happen, he thus generated a hope that there would be a bright future, as is hinted at the end of the novel. Lao She's wishful belief echoes the words of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), who coined the term "dystopia": "What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour [the dys-topia or caco-topia] is too bad to be practicable." (Mill's speech in the Parliament, 1868)

This essay mainly focuses on recent science fiction representations of utopia and dystopia, and I contend that the new wave of Chinese science fiction involves a self-conscious

effort to energize a utopian/dystopian variation.[1] For the new wave that emerged after the 1980s – China's last decade that was marked by sweeping utopian thinking – the dystopian variations enable sober reflections on the effects of the Panglossian ideas and practices that permeated China's twentieth century. In the new wave, I have identified the utopian/dystopian variations of three motifs: China's rise as a one-nation utopia; the myth of China's high-speed development; and the posthuman utopia of technologies. (Mingwei Song 2013) All three connect the new wave to earlier utopian fiction, particularly works written in the late Qing and the early PRC. But in the current science fictional representations, development comes with a heavy cost; prosperity is foreshadowed by apocalypse; the utopian vision of China's ascendency to superpower status cannot conceal its treacherous, inhuman conditions; and the cult of technology facilitates the emergence of authoritarian technocracy. For this generation of Chinese writers, utopia is no longer attainable, and its dystopian variations only complicate the implications of hope. The utopian mentality that Karl Mannheim defines as the foundation of ideological fictions still prevails in the state-controlled Chinese political thought, and as Mannheim claims, any attempt to transcend utopianism is a challenging "quest for reality," (Karl Mannheim 1985, 98) which in Chinese literature denotes a profound restructuring of the knowledge about how reality can be represented, illuminated, or conceived in literary visions – not just visions brightened by the Chinese dream but also its science fictional shadows. Deeply entangled with the politics of anticipating China's further changes and often a profound disappointment at the country's entrenched politics, the provocative dystopian rewriting of the grandiose narrative of the nation's future makes contemporary science fiction a pensive genre ushering us into *terra incognita*, the rising China's invisible dystopian shadow.

The rise of China has been a central motif in Chinese fiction since the last Qing reformers designated those enchanting blueprints for the national rejuvenation. An entire century later, those blueprints appear closer to realization than ever, but the glorified image of China's one-nation utopia is now darkened by the complicating international relations and impending technologized total control. Such is the image of China rising to be the sole superpower in the middle of the twenty-first century, as Han Song 韓松 (b. 1965) envisions in *Mars Over America* (*Huoxing zhaoyao Meiguo* 火星照耀美國, 2000), which is at best a parody of utopianism. Han Song's narrative reveals the ambiguities between China's "strong nation" image and its entire population's submission to controls executed by centralized artificial intelligence. To take a further step toward China's current reality, Chan Koonchung's 陳冠中 (b. 1952) *The Fat Years* (*Shengshi* 盛世2009) envisions a Chinese "Nineteen Eighty-Four" scenario, which exposes the pervasive state surveillance and the Party's usage of both censorship and biotechnologies to induce a nationwide amnesia, so that the entire population will forget the traumatic, painful recent past, including the Tiananmen Protest. In both Han Song's and Chan's novels, the new *Pax Sinica* comes together with shadowy conspiracies, and China's success is discounted by its loss of autonomy

[1] I have published two other research articles on the "variations of utopia," which examine the metamorphosis of the utopian themes in contemporary science fiction, particularly in Han Song and Liu Cixin, two major authors. See Mingwei Song, 2013; Mingwei Song 2015b. This study is a new research project that allows me to explore the dystopian and heterotopian motifs in several other authors.

to an invisible dictatorship that is not executed by any "person" but posthuman cybernetic and bioengineered governance.

The myth of development is another important motif in Chinese science fiction, and it has been a mainstay in the Chinese mindset since the country entered the reform era in the early 1980s, when the pursuit of an increasingly higher GDP became the index of the nation's strength. Han Song's "Track Trilogy"[2] and other works often incarnate the nation's speedy development in various means of transportation, such as subway and high-speed train, but when the speed is accelerated to the point that the transportation vehicles go out of control, the progress that the speed entails turns into nightmarish scenes of (post)human degeneration and devolution. The myth is also revealed in Han Song's retold stories about the utopian motif that the obsession with speed feeds the body's growth without upgrading the mind. It is a rather ironic rewriting of China's economic miracle, which is achieved on the condition that any attempt at political reform is strictly forbidden.

Other writers turn to technological utopia, which testifies to Chinese reform's heavy reliance on science and technology, in line with the national policy on modernization. Liu Cixin 劉慈欣 (b. 1963), an advocate for "hard science fiction," is the most notable author promoting such a posthuman utopia. Liu often designs a postapocalyptic scenario that sees the demise of humankind in exchange for the survival of posthuman species, who, reengineered or aided by technology, are better adapted to Earth's radically changed environment. However, this scenario also posits profound questions about the disposability of humanity and the humanities. In his many short stories as well as "The Three-Body Trilogy,"[3] facing the inevitable cosmological catastrophe, his human characters are often stuck in a moral dilemma about survival as immoral social Darwinists or demise as morally self-conscious human beings. Nevertheless, though Liu Cixin often writes about the worst possible scenario for the human future, he also keeps alive a poetic heart that leaves some room for hope.

All three motifs show to us that what have emerged in contemporary Chinese science fiction are "variations of utopia," by which I refer to the literary practice of reevaluating, reimaging, recapitulating, and relocating utopia. The utopian motifs that characterized China's cultural modernity in earlier historical periods have met with serious reflections and innovative experiments, and the earlier projects and practice have also become themes for parody and mutated into critical utopias or dystopias. The same strategies are employed to approach contemporary reality: while China's reality has increasingly become utopianized in official discourse and state media, it is represented in parodies and disenchanting recapitulations in contemporary science fiction. While very few works of contemporary science fiction directly engage with the political problems of China, the new wave authors have all created some discursive space where varying degrees of dissatisfaction and discontent motivate the utopian/dystopian variations, sometimes suggestive

[2] Han Song's "The Track Trilogy" consists of three novels, *Subway* Ditie 地鐵, *High Speed Rail* Gaotie 高鐵, and *Tracks* Guidao 軌道, which were published between 2010 and 2014.

[3] Liu Cixin's "The Three-Body Trilogy" consists of three novels, *The Three-Body Problem* San ti三體, *Dark Forest* Hei'an senlin 黑暗森林, and *Death's End* Sishen yongsheng 死神永生, which were published between 2006 and 2010, and translated into English in 2014–16.

of poetic justice, and literature conceives a heterotopian relationship between words and the world.

In this essay, I do not take utopia and its modifications as mainly a political theme, but rather consider it a forever changing literary topology of hope. This can be best represented in the science fiction authors' self-conscious constructs of heterotopia, which parallels the efforts to render science fictionality into a discursive form of otherness in contemporary Chinese fiction. Utopia and dystopia are the two sides of one coin, representing two opposing approaches to evaluating the same system in a totalistic way, either completely positive or completely negative. But the vision of a heterotopia escapes these dualistic and totalistic approaches.

The Foucauldian concept "heterotopia" (Michel Foucault 1998, 175–186) was first introduced to Chinese literary studies by David Der-wei Wang in a 2011 lecture about the utopian tradition in modern China. (David Der-wei Wang 2014, 247–276) Wang particularly emphasizes that science fiction represents a new generation of Chinese writers' efforts to create or enter "heterotopia." Based on Foucault's description, Wang gives this critical term the following interpretation: "Heterotopia is a phantasmal approximation of a utopia (or dystopia); it aims to 'contain' social bodies and elements – in the sense of both including things of variations within a closure and holding something undesirable in check – by means of creating a (textual, virtual, or actual) space of otherness. Its spatiality contains more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than immediately meet the eye." (David Der-wei Wang 2020b, 62)

As a literary space, heterotopia does not necessarily register hope or despair. Although it too represents alternatives, it does not necessarily come from a total denial of reality; the alternatives are not excluded from reality but may suggest feasible and practical changes that can occur anywhere. The changes are not totalistic but can be fragmentary, fluid, and transforming. Compared with the concepts of both utopia and dystopia, heterotopia is less idealistic, but more dicentric, diverse, open to more possibilities. (Chan Koonchung 2016, 27–29) It can be folded, multilayered and multifaceted, in the invisible, or more precisely speaking, it can be folded in the literary representation of the invisible. If utopia and dystopia are the two sides of the absolute image of an imaginary state, heterotopia is the insurgent utopian impulse of anarchy that fragments our reality, both space and time, into potentially changeable bits. Heterotopia can be a paper universe, remapping the atlas of crisis, chance, and change, redefining the positioning of places, values, and individuals, and making a unitary vision of utopia that collapses into multiple mirrors for self-recognition, self-performance, and self-metamorphosis.

In this essay, "heterotopia" refers to an imaginary, fantastic literary practice versus the realistic mode of narrative fixed to the certain "chronotope," and I even propose to rephrase "heterotopia" as "hetero-chronotope" to clearly suggest otherness and uncertainty in both the topological and temporal senses, versus "chronotope" representing a certain historical consciousness in the making of subjectivity. For science fiction, the heterotopia or hetero-chronotope dismantles the conditions for subjectivity, and it implies an alternative space and time where the human self is dissolved in the posthuman possibilities.

Contemporary Chinese science fiction is filled with heterotopian spaces as locations, real or imaginary, in time and space: Han Song's labyrinthine underground worlds of the

subway, the sleepwalking city, the red ocean, the hospital, and even his future America (and China); Liu Cixin's disorderly Trisolaran planet, the three-body virtual reality, the dark forest, the poetry cloud, and even the small cosmos that functions as the record of memories of the perished Earth; and a series of worlds created by younger authors – such as the three different hierarchical "spaces" in Hao Jingfang's 郝景芳 (b. 1984)"Folding Beijing" (*Beijing zhedie* 北京折疊, 2014) and the "electronic graveyard" in Chen Qiufan's 陳楸帆 (b. 1981) *Waste Tide* (*Huang chao* 荒潮, 2013). Han Song has also coined the term "Sino-topia" *Zhongtuobang* 中托邦to not only redefine China as the "other space" in relation to the world but also delineate a part of China, or even its whole, as an invisible space in our perceivable reality. (Han Song 2020)

In the rest of this essay, I will introduce a group of new writers, including science fiction authors such as Bao Shu 寶樹 (b. 1980) and Hao Jingfang, and also those who are not usually labeled as science fiction authors or even Chinese writers, such as Chan Koonchung, a Hong Kong writer residing in Beijing, and Dung Kai-cheung 董啟章 (b. 1967) and Lo Yi-chun 駱以軍 (b. 1967), avant-garde writers experimenting with science fictional motifs. I do not intend to analyze their novels as examples to illustrate the utopian/dystopian interventions in the political sense, but rather to explore the vigorous, multifaceted variations of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia that these authors have created as discursive constructs that suggest alternatives to both the utopia/dystopian dualism and the usual literary practice taking words as reflections of the world – to these writers, words are worlds.

"A Century-old Dream Comes True"

During the first ten years of the twentieth century, a certain utopianism mainly based on the prevailing evolutionary thinking and a cultural confidence in national rejuvenation motivated the birth of the so-called "new fiction," first coined by Liang Qichao, the key leader of the late Qing reform movement, who saw in fiction a magic power to "renovate the people of a nation." (Liang Qichao 1996) Both science fiction and utopian fiction were among the new genres Liang promoted, and they were often combined in the late Qing. Through the efforts of Liang and his contemporaries, science fiction was instituted as a utopian narrative that provided both a reflection on reality and a hope for change. Thus, at its inception, Chinese science fiction was invested with a strong utopianism, and its narrative projected political desires for reform into an idealized future that served as an alternative contrast to China's reality. Liang's own attempt at fiction writing, *The Future of New China*, was intended as a fine example of the new fiction. This novel was designed to delineate the (future) history of Chinese political reforms over the next sixty years – an imagined process that crystallizes Liang's blueprint for China's self-strengthening, national rejuvenation, and eventual ascendency to a world power. Liang's splendid vision was immediately appropriated in numerous late Qing science fiction novels, including Wu Jianren's 吳趼人 (1866–1910) *New Story of the Stone* (*Xin shitou ji* 新石頭記, 1908), Biheguan zhuren's 碧荷官主人*New Era* (*Xin jiyuan* 新紀元, 1908), and Lu Shi'e's 陸士鄂 *New China* (*Xin Zhongguo* 新中國, 1910), which all competed to portray China as a future superpower dominating the world. These novels defined Chinese science fiction

as a genre closely associated with the emerging nationalist discourse, and the futuristic image of a one-nation utopia characterized the genre's cultural dynamism.

However, unfortunately, Liang Qichao's *Future of New China* remains unfinished, with its narrative of future events stuck between a prologue showcasing the achieved goals of China's future reform and the stagnation in plot development caused by contemporary ideological contestations. The narrative never moves beyond the initial stage of blueprinting. A similar stagnation, or a gap in the narrative layout, happens in other late Qing novels predicting China's rise, such as *New Story of the Stone*, which adds another layer of ambivalence by blurring the lines between the novel's actualization of a utopian realm and the protagonist's subconscious dreamscape. The utopian narrative of new China's splendid future is therefore "stranded at its launching point, revealing the future as a fantastic illusion instead of a probable reality." (Mingwei Song 2015a, 87) Likewise, the translation of utopian ideals into revolutionary actions met with repeated frustrations throughout China's twentieth century, and this has sustained a prolonged utopian impulse in the mindset of Chinese intellectuals yearning for new beginnings, again and again, after breaking with those failed earlier experiments.

Despite China's turbulent twentieth century, utopianism never truly faded out. In the current political culture, it has come back as incarnations of an array of lofty concepts, from the New Left intellectuals' vision of *tianxia* 天下 to government discourses on the "harmonious society" and "Chinese dream." At least for Chinese intellectuals engaging in dialogue with the state-endorsed utopian discourses now, it is not yet the time to talk about the fading out of utopianism, a topic that Western New Left thinkers have confronted. China as a state is still immersed in a prolonged utopian dream of its rise and ascendence to superpower status, which is part of the current state ideology.

Now the utopian vision of China's rise is again a prominent theme in contemporary political thinking and popular culture. Particularly through science fictional recapitulations of late Qing themes and reappropriations of late Qing utopias in current political thinking, it has become increasingly clear that the utopian tradition has come full circle. But this time, utopia has turned into the state ideology. The emphases on the orderly structure of society, on the centrality of the state in people's lives, and on the popular surrender to power have helped sustain the Chinese version of centralism in the name of both the Confucian and communist traditions. The conscious staging of a spectacular *Pax Sinica* Shengshi 盛世 – a peaceful rising "great nation" – is intended to mark the beginning of the nation's great revival and its ascendency to a superpower in the world.

This new dream has motivated a series of political strategies and cultural enterprises, ranging from the "China dream" slogan to the "one belt, one road" initiative, from the orderly and submissive "harmonious society" to the aggressive importing of "soft power," and from the restorations of imperial glories in TV dramas to a national call for science fiction films promoting the Communist Party's notion of the "shared community of humankind." But the most important aspect of this renewed utopian dream is related to the obsession with the technological innovations, the space race, information wars, and in particular, the current state-led programs for designing advanced artificial intelligence and creating superior biotechnological power – all motifs for science fiction.

It seems that "a century-old dream has come true," as characters in Chan Koonchung's 2009 dystopian novel *The Fat Years* have come to realize. "China's Golden Age of Ascendancy had arrived. For so many years intellectuals had said that the Western system was superior, and the whole world looked up to the United States, Japan, and the Western Europe, but then in unison they suddenly changed their tune, and now the whole world was learning from or emulating China." (Chan Koonchung 2011, 248–249) Furthermore, in Han Song's words in *Mars over America*, those living in 2066 – a significant year not only because it marks the centennial of Mao's Cultural Revolution but also because it projects Liang Qichao's original timetable of locating the future of new China in the middle of the twenty-first century – will have been able to see "the fall of the United States, the sinking of Japan, and the rise of China, which succeeded in creating eternal prosperity in economy and trade around the entire world, and throughout the entire solar system. At the same time, with its exceedingly superior intelligence, Amanduo tirelessly and wholeheartedly administrates our ordinary everyday life … this is indeed an epoch of unrivaled joys and happiness." (Han Song 2011, 11) Here enters the first variation of utopia – a dystopian gaze.

Dystopian Gaze

When China's first decade of the twenty-first century culminated in the Beijing Olympic Games (2008) and Shanghai World Expo (2010), it seemed that those utopian dreams of the late Qing reformers had come true – the latter had even actualized the predictions in Wu Jianren's *New Story of the Stone* and Lu Shi'e's *New China* that a major world event would be held exactly in Pudong, Shanghai. That China has reached unprecedented prosperity in modern history is widely propagated as a milestone in various contemporary narratives about the nation's great revival. Such an outlook inspired Chan Koonchung to write a novel, which was published between the Beijing Games and Shanghai Expo.[4] The title is *The Fat Years*, or *shengshi* 盛世, exactly the term that the ancient emperors used to boast of their achievements in securing a lasting period of peace and prosperity, the same vision now instituted as the foundation of the "China dream," a state-owned version of utopia.

The Fat Years introduces readers to the near future of China, when a sweeping optimism is central in the mentality of the entire population. The protagonist, Old Chen *Lao Chen* 老陳, a Hong Kong writer residing in Beijing (just like the author himself), finds that everyone he meets looks "genuinely happy, even euphoric," and he says to himself: "This really must be a true age of peace and prosperity." (Chan Koonchung 2011, 10) Despite this, Old Chen and a few friends have come to notice some subtle changes: for example, Old Chen discovers that books by some prominent liberal intellectuals have disappeared from bookstores and also from people's conversations or even memories; his friend Fang Caodi 方草地is troubled by the omission of one whole month from the narratives of contemporary events as well as from everyone's memory; Old Chen's love

[4] The novel, *The Fat Years* 盛世, was only published in Taiwan and Hong Kong, but never printed in the PRC.

interest, Little Xi 小夕, a political dissident always running into trouble with the state, says to him that there are fewer and fewer people who have not changed; and finally, a call girl using drugs puts her finger on it for Old Chen – about two years ago, everybody suddenly changed and began to have what the girl calls a small-small high or "high lite-lite." (Chan Koonchung 2011, 123) This happened when the government abruptly declared that the nation had now entered *shengshi* and the prevailing euphoria descended on people, together with a collective amnesia making them forget all the painful things in the past – including the one whole month that Fang Caodi talks about. Now Old Chen and his friends have caught a glimpse of something unsettling behind the deceptively "real" world. They have to gaze into a darker world, and by doing so they transgress the borderline between ideological comforts and a treacherous territory marked by a conspiratorial network.

Old Chen and his friends' experiences of the subtle changes are not unfamiliar to those living through China's post-1989 years of furthering economic reform but closing doors to political reform. It is the usual practice for the government to remove public intellectuals from view, their opinions censored, ideas suppressed, and words silenced; the nation's collective amnesia about recent tragedies such as the Tiananmen Massacre and even historical trauma during the Cultural Revolution is a shared strategy for those who experienced but chose to forget history and those who never experienced it and were denied access to the collective historical memory. Those who used to hold to "Idealism Chinese Style" (Chan Koonchung 2011, 199) are falling into hedonism, cynicism, pragmaticism, or conformism.

The Fat Years is not strictly a science fiction novel, with less concentration on imaginary details of scientific novum than on a realistic depiction of ordinary scenes in Beijing's intellectual life, where the prevailing "high lite-lite" mood is the intended psychology for those living through the promising years leading to the Olympic Games and World Expo. "Are you happy?" – such a direct question obviously expecting a positive answer was asked many times to common people on the state-controlled TV programs, a small index to the state's systematic endeavor to create a seamless ideological dreamwork integrating everything into a political utopia, including even the mellow moods of the common citizens.[5] The nation's ideological apparatus is now in full gear to produce a paradise in the Middle Kingdom.

Chan Koonchung's narrative unfolds as an investigation of the clandestine mechanism of the state apparatus that integrates ideology and everyday life, remodeling the latter into an indispensable part of the grandiose narrative about "China's Golden Age of Ascendency." Near the end of the novel, a high-ranking official is forced to break the truth to Old Chen and his friends: it was during the whole missing month, which Fang Caodi has kept reminding people about, that the state launched a sudden strike to clear the path for a nationwide campaign aiming to reform the entire Chinese people once and for all. Different from earlier political campaigns, this government project is ultimately a scientific one, which translates the ideological weapon into a biochemical component

[5] The science fiction author Bao Shu wrote a short story about this phenomenon, in which a person gave a negative answer to the question "are you happy?" and later was treated with various virtual realities to enhance his feeling of happiness. Bao Shu, "Ni xingfu ma?" 你幸福嗎？ http://www.wcsfa.com/scfbox-2433.html (accessed November 2, 2020).

(MDNA-Ecstasy[6]) that when added to drinking water, milk, juice, wine, and all liquid forms of food, eventually doses the entire population, creating a lasting euphoric mood and immersing the entire nation in an indulgent appreciation of *shengshi*.

Wang Chaohua has pointed out that the dystopian vision in Chan Koonchung's novel is not Orwellian. (2015, 23–31) The "high lite-lite" state is orchestrated to induce a hedonistic indulgence in joy rather than a coercive manipulation of people's minds. This is a twenty-first century upgrading of authoritarianism that does not need to solely rely on surveillance of people's thoughts or the mechanical feeds of "truths." In the Orwellian society, there is still the separation of soul and body, where Winston can find a temporary escape from the gaze of Big Brother, but in the contemporary vision of *shengshi*, the bio-reprogramming of people's mood has seized on the structure of feeling, transforming citizens into new men and new women for a completely new epoch. This certainly recalls Lu Xun's "art of creating humanity" through gene editing, (Lu Xun 2012, 70–77) but the triumphant use of science is now targeted at achieving total control. Chan Koonchung's *shengshi* is not possible without the aid of technology, which can stand as a metaphor for the technology of the ideology or be simply a literal allusion to the ideology's techno-embodiment. What has been achieved here is the creation of an entirely virtual world that writes into mind and body the programs for simulated knowledge of the "truths" as well as simulated feelings for the "real." In such a world, Big Brother does not need to watch you any longer; everyone has assimilated a virtual version of Big Brother.

But here, Chan Koonchung takes one step further to explore the relationship between the Leviathan and its people. The high-ranking official has to admit that he feels puzzled about one thing: that the collective amnesia is not part of the drug effect but comes from the people's willingness to brainwash themselves so that they can forget the unpleasant, troubling past. This provides the best possible scenario for the Party to censor and change the historical narrative as they wish. Here, Chan Koonchung reaches a revealing moment to parodize the utopian/dystopian variation in his novel: isn't this everyone's wishful dream – a strong China, rising above the great nations of the world? What price are you ready to pay for it?

An even more chilling revelation is that even MDNA-Ecstasy is perhaps not necessary. *Shengshi*, the virtual embodiment of the state ideology, in all sorts of storytelling and entertainment ushering people into the programmed dreamscape network, is the "inducement" itself. Chemical, conceptual, or cultural, it is the virtual key to the programming of the *shengshi* mentality. In the ultimate analysis, Chan Koonchung's narrative has turned this virtual realm of China's prosperity inside out, and for him and other writers experimenting with utopian/dystopian variations, storytelling is the device to penetrate the matrix of the dream. When the high-ranking official is telling "the good China story," with an overwhelming self-confidence, Chan Koonchung's dystopian gaze rips it open, turning it into a story laying bare its own virtual design.

Chen Koonchung presents *shengshi* as the most realistic possible version of dystopia, and because of its proximity to contemporary reality, it appears even more convincingly inevitable. Even if Old Chen still has the chance to choose, he may not have escaped the

[6] The full name is given in the novel: methylene-dioxy-methamphetamine. (Chan Koonchung 2011, 279).

same game programmed to give him the illusion of free will. But still, he chooses to see with his own eyes and thus creates his own version of the story. Knowing the truth, he is no longer able to stay in the illusive "fake paradise," while the revolting "good hell" is already lost to him. The system is not going to collapse, but as long as the system still has glitches, Old Chen and his friends can hide themselves in its multitude of folds and gaps, those systemic errors. When he can retell the good story of China as a good story about "how the good story is fabricated," he reveals the traces that the system tries to delete, and those traces become a true history.

The Specter of Mao

With *The Fat Years* and other novels all banned in China, Chan Koonchung is usually considered a political writer, famous for the genre of dystopian fiction rather than science fiction, though he clearly shares with the new wave authors – such as Han Song and Chen Qiufan – alertness to total control, either embodied in advanced cybernetics or, as in *The Fat Years*, represented as a secret mechanism to manipulate the entire population's thoughts and feelings, dreams and moods, personality and personhood. In addition, Chan Koonchung is a keen observer and thinker who tackles difficult questions pertaining to China's political system and analyzes the contradictions in our time. He stands as the most outspoken author who does not hesitate to give the utopian vision of China's grandiose new epoch a dystopian twist. The cover of the English edition of *The Fat Years* shows a smiling face emoji half covering Mao's solemn face, leaving one eye for him to gaze back at readers, which dramatizes Chan's provoking irreverence to the great man, but also implies the deterrence of Mao now disguised in an eerie symbol of the information age.

Among the new wave writers, Liu Cixin and Han Song both lived through Mao's Cultural Revolution. Maoist revolution and ideology were part of their personal growth, and Mao's specter has wandered in their science fictional realms marked by space wars and cybernetic uprisings. These two authors have carried out some of the most interesting utopian/dystopian variations, but certainly with less pointed and direct criticism of contemporary China than Chan Koonchung. They often choose to localize or isolate dystopian aspects of the society, such as the environmental crisis, and social injustice disguised as discrimination against cyborgs, nonhuman beings, and various others. In their novels, the dystopian visions are manifested as the estranged worlds to form a closely interactive relationship with our daily reality.

The acute feelings, pain, powerlessness, and despair in Han Song's characters are conveyed through cryptic, abstruse descriptions that converge in a dystopian gaze to the abysmal depth of our reality. To many readers, Han Song's labyrinthine, multilayered narratives may need a key, just like what Chan Koonchung offers through Old Chen's clear investigation of the conspiracy, but the opaque darkness in Han Song's dystopian abyss devours all, making the conspiracy a part of the mysterious but unstoppable eternal return of the dark and evil. For Han Song, dystopia has gained a metaphysical universality that is applied to all signs and images in his novels. Unlike Old Chen, who can choose to exit the game, Han Song's characters are not even aware of that choice.

They are struggling in the dreams programmed by the older ideologies but mutated by the new technologies.

However, all things have origins. In Han Song, the repeated references to the "sleepwalking years," dark conspiracies, and haunting dead souls all point to Mao's Cultural Revolution if these details are read against specific historical backgrounds: the sleepwalking youths dressed in green (like the Red Guards), the mysterious underground construction (Mao's haven in case of nuclear attack), and the permanence of wartime (Mao's call for the eternal war).[7] Mao's ghost may have pulled strings in many scenarios in Han Song's novels, but he has never showed his face; when the female protagonist in *Dead Souls Wang hun* 亡魂 (2018) looks into the abyss, the consciousness that is enlivened by the gaze is not a person, not Mao, but a ruthless force that epitomizes all the evil, desire, conspiracies, illusive promises, and sublime self-transcendences, which are all traceable to Maoism (Han Song 2018, 226).

Actually, the specter of Mao has also enlivened some of the most stirring visions in Liu Cixin's novels. In a highly symbolic style, Chairman Mao appears in Liu Cixin's unpublished novel *China 2185* 中國2185 (1989). Not a typical monster, Mao's cybernetic ego is nevertheless dangerous enough to cause panic for the leadership of the future China, and this very plot suggests that the formidable specter of Mao conveys a potentially subversive message about the alternative to reality; thus, Mao still stands for utopia. Liu Cixin's ambivalent revival of Mao's consciousness as a digital "life" in *China 2185* presents variations of the post-Mao utopianism. He depicts a brighter future when China embraces economic prosperity as well as a very youthful democracy, which Hua Li associates with the pro-democracy youth movements running throughout the 1980s. (Hua Li 2015, 519–541) Mao's role in this novel is not negative, but Mao's cybernetic phantom's self-chosen exit suggests the reflections on China's century-long utopian vision for radical social change in a sweeping revolution. Above all, Liu Cixin's novel may register the intention to "invite Mao to step down from the altar," as former science fiction writer Ye Yonglie 葉永烈 (1940–2020) did in the 1990s through writing unofficial biographies about the great man.[8]

Mao also plays a role in Liu Cixin's magnum opus, the "Three-Body Trilogy," in which Mao appears and personally launches the secret mission searching for extraterrestrial intelligence,[9] which forms the first motif for the novel series and eventually brings the space war to planet Earth. The great leader's appearance is brief and indirect in the novel, but in a broader context, Mao's revolutionary ideas and ideals serve as the background for the entire epic story. Mao's Cultural Revolution lays the foundation for the immoral framework of the dark forest. Misanthropy combined with a hope for a violent purge

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7 All these images appear in Han Song's 2010 novel, *Subway*.

8 Ye Yonglie published a series of unofficial biographies of the great leaders of China, including books on Mao and Deng Xiaoping, as well as on the key figures in the Gang of Four, during the 1990s. He and other science fiction writers of his generation were forced to give up writing science fiction during the 1983 "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" campaign. The "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" campaign was a temporary comeback of the Cultural Revolution-like political struggle against liberal intellectuals, which targeted literature and arts that were believed to deviate from the party-line.

9 In the published version, Mao's name disappeared from the text. Instead, the name of the leader is presented as three blank blocks. In the English translation, it is presented as XXX (Liu Cixin 2014, 165–173).

of all the evils of humanity transforms the female protagonist Ye Wenjie 葉文潔 into a charismatic figure, like Mao, who ushers us into a hostile universe where a permanent struggle, like the permanent revolution Mao called for, has been carried on since the moment the universe came into existence.

In Liu Cixin's trilogy, the universe is described as a dark forest where only those who are not afflicted with moral concerns can survive. This vision is no doubt a historicized image deeply rooted in Mao's conviction that men find endless pleasure in the eternal battle against heaven and earth as well as against other human beings, which forms the very utopian visions of Maoist revolution. Struggles that transcend "morality" as defined by humanness energize human progress as well as cosmic change, and they have become the propelling motif in Liu Cixin's novels. What stays central to the grandiose Maoist utopian discourse is the foundational belief shared by Liu Cixin, the eternal revolution that transcends humanity.

Compared with Han Song, Liu Cixin has less interest in social criticism, but his allusions to Maoist imagery and ideology may betray a deeper connection to the Maoist politics. Mao's typical incarnation in the astronomical image, the sun, has been an eternal source for Liu Cixin's science fictional imagination. The sun can give life but also posit threats to humans, and the explosion of sun signifies a catalytic event that is nevertheless the most sublime event in Liu Cixin's science fictional scenarios. In stories like "The Sun of China" *Zhongguo taiyang* 中國太陽 (2003), Liu Cixin revives the myth of the sun through giving it a utopian new look as the source of not just clean energy but also inspiration for Chinese new youths to embark on exploratory journeys to the stars.

Liu Cixin may have lent force to the return of Maoism, or at least the aesthetics of the Maoist sublime. In a certain sense, just like the situation in *China 2185*, Liu Cixin has indeed revived Mao's consciousness and transplanted it into a new age of digitalized dreamscape. In this regard, Liu Cixin has breathed new life into Maoist utopianism. At the same time, he clearly shows the other, darker side of the sun of China – the cosmic movement propelled by the Maoist vision of a permanent revolution moves farther and farther away from where humans feel at home. The aestheticism of the Maoist sublime is best exemplified in the dazzling depictions of the end of the solar system in *Death's End* – an apocalyptic endgame for the humanity but a climax of the eternal battles of the universe.

"What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear"

Compared with Han Song and Liu Cixin, not to mention Chan Koonchung, the younger generation of Chinese science fiction writers, born and raised in the reform era, have relatively less directly critical engagement with the Maoist utopian dreams, or the current reviving utopianism. For them, utopia does not just seem virtual (as in *The Fat Years*), it is virtual. The centrality of the one-state utopia and the science fictional parodic variations are also largely absent in their writings. Instead, these young authors, such as Zhao Haihong 趙海虹 (b. 1977) and 拉拉 (b. 1979), take on the iconic images and themes associated with the older revolutionary traditions, rendering them into dreamlike utopian impulses in their fantastic world buildings. This practice is certainly less utopian

than sentimental and entertaining, converging in a wondrous anachronism that turns fragments of utopia into food for cultural consumerism.

Uchronia is utopia in a futuristic setting, as defined by the world's first major Uchronian novel, Louis-Sébanstien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771), which "decisively moved utopia from the ineffectual realms of no place to the influential arena of future possibilities." (Paul K. Alkon 2010, 4) Compared with utopia as a hope for locating the ideal society elsewhere, which was first born in the age of great geographical discovery, Uchronia was a byproduct of the French Revolution, evoking an even more fierce revolutionary spirit that was to create a better world to come, rewriting the biblical apocalypse into a teleological program denoting the eternal progressive movement of history. Uchronia is certainly behind Liang Qichao's vision for the new China or Mao's program for the Cultural Revolution. While the earlier writers, even those who take it negatively, treat Uchronia as essentially part of the ongoing process of historicizing the present time, for the younger writers, Uchronia as a chronotope is no longer accessible, now closed off and shattered into fragments, alive only as tropes and memories. In their writings, history, together with its Uchronian future, has come to an end.

Both Zhao Haihong and La La produced in the early 2000s science fictional variations of the then popular contemporary rewriting of the so-called "Red Classics." (Dai Jinhua 2009, 151–178) Their writings contain dreamlike nostalgic moments of China's revolutionary past, but they mostly keep the fragments of the utopia as props, decoys, or even objects for aestheticization within well-contained virtual time bubbles. Even as the source for nostalgia, the utopian visions lose their political significance, turning into mirages suggesting the illusiveness of both the utopian past and its contemporary virtual reemergence. This happens in Zhao Haihong's short story "1923: A Fantasy" (1923 *Kehuan gushi* 1923科幻故事, 2007) and La La's "The Radio Waves That Never Die" (*Yong bu xiaoshi de dianbo* 永不消逝的電波, 2007). Both stories recapitulate the themes and plot designs of Chinese revolutionary literature in a postrevolutionary and even posthuman context.

Zhao Haihong's story "1923: A Fantasy" takes us back to the past, weaving a "revolution plus love" story into a dreamy narrative about science, revolution, and romance, and creating a more vivid nostalgic atmosphere than a coherent storyline. (Zhao Haihong 2018, 258–275) Her story intentionally misuses historical information to highlight the illusory nature of the memory of revolution, which is further symbolized by the nickname of the mysterious, elusive woman revolutionary with whom the male protagonist falls in love, Bubbles 泡泡. The protagonist, a scientist returning from the West, has a passionate devotion to inventing modern machines for the benefit of the nation, but after falling in love with Ms. Bubbles, he is completely obsessed with using his scientific vision and effort to producing the memory-preserving aqua-dream machine. The machine in the story shines as an aesthetic assemblage of all the brilliant tropes for a perfect steampunk novel: it is more fluid than solid, evocative than instructive, and overall, the science fictional vision of novum is shown more as a literary trope than a technological tool. For the author who fantasizes this revolutionary story, the aqua-dream machine functions more like a writing machine to keep memory alive in those floating liquid bubbles than a reconstruction of the revolutionary utopian vision. At best, Zhao Haohong's science fictional reconstruction of the Red Classic foregrounds the rose-colored dream of the revolutionary past, laying bare a deliberate rewriting of

the story as a counterdiscourse to the revolutionary message that her story tries to locate in that time period: science is intended to serve the revolutionary cause, but eventually creates a romantic dream for the eternal (e)motion. Obviously, the latter lasts longer than the utopian dream and continues to enchant the offspring of those revolutionaries as well as the readers of her story.

The title of La La's story clearly alludes to one of the best-known Red Classics, "The Radio Waves That Never Die," the 1958 film bearing the same title, which portrays a heroic, self-sacrificing secret agent whose work is to transmit military information from Japanese-occupied Shanghai to the Communist base in Yan'an. La La's story does not succeed in creating a revolutionary personality compatible with what the title suggests but focuses on the receiving end of the radio messages, a listener who does nothing at all in the entire narrative. The protagonist is a misanthropic cyborg who escapes reality by hacking and listening to radio messages transmitted from alien worlds in deep space. (La La 2018, 227–257) Through a puzzle-solving process, the narrative shows how he decodes, reconstructs, and interprets a series of mysterious radio messages from ancient time, with a rising hope to retrieve memories of a better age of the human world, a Uchronia in the long-lost past. While he seems to rekindle passion for humanity and begins to understand the revolutionary exodus of the human race out of the solar system on a treacherous journey into space, what he eventually hears and confirms is only the tragic collapse of the ancient human astronauts' spacecraft after they have sowed human genes on an alien planet. The story does not tell us whether that planet is where all the posthuman creatures, including the listener, come from. But it ends with absolute silence from the listener, who shows no emotion at all after hearing the last transmitted message.

Of this younger generation, Bao Shu has composed some of the most sophisticated, often paradoxical and absurd stories about the themes of time and history. One of his most famous stories is also about posthuman offspring capturing transmissions from the past. Six hundred and fifty light-years away, a bright star keeps broadcasting powerful, militant, and sublime songs that attract a human spaceship to approach it and explore its history. Originally titled "Star Songs" (*Xingge* 星歌, 2012) when first released on the internet, in the print version the story became "Songs of Ancient Earth" (*Gulao de diqiu zhi ge* 古老的地球之歌, 2013), and what the space explorers discovered in that star also changed. In the online version, "star songs" are exactly the so-called "red songs," the patriotic revolutionary songs from Mao's age, which went through a revival at the time Bao Shu wrote the story. The larger background was the revival of Maoist ideology as part of the political agenda designed by the then ambitious mayor of Chongqing City, Bo Xilai 薄熙來. Unlike the other two stories just discussed, which are relatively apolitical, Bao Shu's story creates a meaningful dialogue with the political trend of regenerating a utopian vision for China, and his narrative provides a subtle, poignant comment on China's return to Maoist radicalism during the power transition in 2012–13. In the print version, the "star songs" are changed to the patriotic revolutionary songs from Stalin's age, thus shifting the identity of the long-perished civilization from socialist China to the Soviet Union. (Bao Shu 2013a, 126–162) But the English translation, upon the author's request, restored the original Chinese revolutionary songs. (Bao Shu 2018, 375–409)

These songs are broadcast by nanorobots that fell into the depth of the star centuries ago. This monstrously glowing star is both astronomically and politically a "red giant," or

"red star." The explorers no longer know anything about a socialist state that once upon a time existed on planet Earth, but they are all emotionally touched by these blood-boiling songs. Through archaeological work they discover how the songs were brought to this distant bright star: the ancient astronauts traveling here survived solely by listening to these songs that tempered their steely will, made them both hard-working and self-sacrificing, with strong passions exactly as they were intended to evoke during the socialist movement. The current team of explorers cannot stop listening, and a cult of "red songs" begins to emerge among them. Bao Shu's joke with this half-realistic, half-fantastic scenario enlarges the effect of the cult of "Red Songs" to an astronomical scale. What these songs have made is not just a team of devoted fans, but actually the entire fate of the universe is now changed. The artificial intelligence controlling the spaceship, Athena, also the narrator of the story, has also been converted to whatever -ism these songs advocate. She (female as it is) decides to crash the spaceship into the star and trigger the red giant to explode into a supernova that will spread the revolutionary songs to the entire galaxy. The cosmic concert of revolutionary songs just begins: "This is the final struggle / Let us group together, and tomorrow / The Internationale / Will be the human race." (More accurately, "the Internationale will be the posthuman.") The song is collectively voiced by the nanorobots that will now colonize the entire universe and reproduce themselves infinitely. (Bao Shu 2018, 375–409) Bao Shu smartly keeps the tone of the story seriocomic. In a profoundly comical or paradoxical way, it points to the absurd mixture of nostalgia and anachronism as defining factors in metamorphosizing the Uchronian vision. For younger authors like Bao Shu, their concern is less a reflection on the utopian tradition of modern China but a semidetached appropriation of it for new world buildings that are actually full of uncertainty.

The strong sense of uncertainty is part of Bao Shu's impression on time and temporality that is also translated into his various designs of restructuring historical narratives. Once a doctoral student in Continental Philosophy, he asks questions about time and its meaning through science fictional world buildings, many of which are centered on visions of parallel universe, time travel, and alternate history. Even more subversive laughter can be heard in Bao Shu's unpublished early stories, which were largely composed in 2010–13, such as "Let's Go to See the Boat on the South Lake" (*Yiqi qu kan Nanhu chuan* 一起去看南湖船, 2011), which was written as an irreverent "gift" for the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. According to the standard historical narrative, the first congress of the Party was held in haste on a boat in the South Lake in July 1921, the time and location enshrined as a historic landmark in both geographical and temporal senses. In Bao Shu's story, this time-space spot becomes the site for "red tourism," again an allusion to an actual practice in contemporary China combining political education and economic benefits in one. But here, the two tourists are time traveling from the future, and their gazes are fixed on two different persons on the spot, two different early Party members. Their conversations soon reveal that they actually came from two parallel timelines, which radically differ in the historical course of the Party's early inner struggle as well as the entire subsequent national history. In one timeline, Mao Zedong died a young martyr and Zhang Guotao 張國燾 became the supreme leader who founded the new China; in the other timeline that is our own, Zhang lost the power struggle with Mao during the Long March. The playful, comical effects

of putting the two timelines together create a problematic confusion about the fixed meanings of historical narrative, where both uchronia and utopia are revealed as rather arbitrary constructs.

Bao Shu wrote two sequels to this politically subversive story and created his first model of the fantastic image of time, which is not linear, without a certain direction, and with no certain value or meaning attached to it. There are an infinite number of parallel universes, each of which could have produced a timeline different from what we know as *history*. This fantasy of time has become the dominant theme in most of Bao Shu's novels and stories. Bao Shu's major breakthrough is a pastiche sequel to the Three-Body Trilogy, *Redemption of Time* (*Guanxiang zhi zhou* 觀想之宙, 2011), in which time is all but certain. The final battle of the dark forest is fought between the creator of the timeless universe, the Prime Mother, and her child, the Lurker, who invents time and thus creates both life and death, as well as changes, meanings, evil, and everything else. In another major novel by Bao Shu, *Ruins of Time* (*Shijian zhi xu* 時間之墟, 2013), he depicts a world stuck in a time loop that lasts 20 hours 33 minutes but repeats billions of times, emptying all meanings of time for those who live in this loop, their consciousness falling apart and histories collapsing into futile cycles of eternal returns.

For Bao Shu, well informed about political and historical philosophies, not only has history just ended, but the absurdities of historical progression can even create alternatives that are not better, but perhaps even worse. Another longer story that Bao Shu wrote but never published in China is "The Great Times" (*Da shidai* 大時代, 2012), which was translated into English with a new title, "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear" (2019). In this story, history performs a great leap backward in time, and actual historical events are narrated in a fictive reverse chronological order paralleling the main characters' storyline. Thus the characters experience history backward from the Olympic Games (2008) to the Tiananmen Massacre (1989) to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to China's Civil War (1945–1949) to Mao's Yan'an years (1936–1945). China's history is then presented as beginning with *shengshi* (prosperity and peace), but degenerating into chaos, catastrophes, wars, national humiliations. This narrative dismantles a certain pattern of temporality that is used to construct a linear, teleological passage toward a definitive utopian vision, and its reversal testifies to the vanity and voidness of any positive meanings attached to notions of historical progress and forward movement. Time is portrayed as arbitrary, protean, without recognizable patterns, and through experiments with dislocating time and temporality, Bao Shu creates the most powerful science fictional questioning of the fixation and certainty of various uchronian and utopian meanings that constitute the historical narratives about the new China.

"What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear" may find an interesting response in Chan Koonchung's 2015 alternate history novel, *The Second Year of the Jianfeng Reign: a Uchronia of New China* Jian feng er nian: xin Zhongguo wuyoushi (建豐二年: 新中國烏有史, 2015), in which the Chinese history assumes a different timeline: the nationalist troops defeat the communists in 1949 and Chiang Kai-Shek's 蔣介石 (1887–1975) reign lasts for another three decades, succeeded by his son, Chiang Ching-Kuo 蔣經國 (1910–1988), who was about to begin reforms in China in 1979. David Der-wei Wang points to the double images of history that Chan presents in the narrative, a mixture of the actual and the virtual, in which "the differences and repetitions of bygone events

work in two timelines working in such a way as to reveal their mutually implicated relations." (David Der-wei Wang 2020a, 97) Even if there is a parallel universe, an alternate history that unfolds differently, all that has passed *does not* necessarily appear in kinder light. The uchronian version of history does not necessarily result in a better image of the new China. Chan Koonchung's imaginary alternative to actual history is still full of ideological contentions, political persecutions, and aborted reform plans, with perhaps the only poetic justice given to Lao She, who survives to win the Nobel Prize, and also to Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902–1988), who completes his most important novel, *Long River Changhe* 長河.[10]

In Bao Shu's story, "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear," the protagonist experiences a uchronian version of the future that is actually the real history of the past unfolding backwardly, and he comes to see the world as fundamentally absurd, "a twisted shadow of some reality." Facing a future that seems certain, he nevertheless feels dreadful: "In the days still to come, my generation would experience events far more terrifying than SARS. We knew nothing of the future that awaited us." (Bao Shu 2019, 157)

Heterotopia: The Other Space Within Our World

Bao Shu's peers of the same age group, Ma Boyong 馬伯庸 (b. 1980) and Hao Jingfang (b. 1984), have both made conscious reflections on the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* scenario in the more immediate context of contemporary China. Ma Boyong's "The City of Silence" (*Jijing zhi cheng* 寂靜之城, 2005) presents a bleak view on the government's control of people's speech and thinking through censoring and regulating online expressions: in a style reminiscent of the Ministry of Truth's replacing the lively everyday speech with the rigid Newspeak in Orwell's original novel, Ma's story describes how the Department of Web Security's "List of Healthy Words" gradually makes all words, from "freedom" to "talking" to "exchange," disappear from everyday speech, which eventually reshapes people's sense of reality. A person cannot vomit because "vomit" is a prohibited word; no one can complain about the lack of "heat" during the winter because "heat" and "furnace" are removed from the daily vocabulary. Eventually the city falls into great silence, when the list of healthy words is now empty: "even the last word had been shielded by the appropriate authorities." (Ma Boyong 2016, 196)

Written in 2005, this story predicted the increasingly heightened web security in China in the following years – the Great Firewall, web monitors, and internet surveillance. Ma's story also created an ultimately dark, dystopian vision of a future that sees the disappearance of the very form for a story like this one told in the "prohibited words," when the text, the last place to find a utopian impulse, is emptied. If the story points to a dystopian image of China that is unspeakable in the daily reality, the story itself becomes a heterotopia that poignantly shows its own exclusion from that reality. Indeed, this story cannot be published in China without being heavily censored because the city of silence is becoming "true."

[10] In reality, Lao She committed suicide at the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, and Shen Congwen abandoned his writing career to pursue an academic life as a researcher at the Palace Museum throughout the Mao years.

Hao Jingfang heightens the significance of the year 1984 in an autobiographical novel titled *Born in Nineteen Eighty-Four* (*Sheng yu yijiubasi*生於一九八四, 2016), which outlines her personal life story growing up in China's recent history, with a special focus on the actual history's paradoxical relationship with Orwell's fictive world. Hao Jingfang's major effort at science fiction writing is a trilogy collectively titled *Vagabonds* (*Liulang cangqiong* 流浪蒼穹, 2012). This ambitious space saga opens with a statement: "This is the tale of the fall of the last utopia." (Hao Jingfang 2020, 4) It depicts an Orwellian society on Mars, which is built with a strong utopian vision but eventually becomes an authoritarian state due to the limitations on resources and the overall hostile environment. It is evolving toward a Spartan military dictatorship. The novel focuses on a group of Martian youths' bewilderment between the darkened idealism of their home planet and a liberal, decadent Earth that represents late capitalism, where personal freedom is also an illusion built upon consumerism and mediocracy.

Hao Jingfang's most famous science fiction work is her Hugo award-winning short story, "Folding Beijing" (*Beijing zhedie* 北京折疊, 2012), which is concerned less with a dystopian future than with a spatial restructuring of contemporary China's social reality. It depicts China's capital city as a folded space:

> The folding city was divided into three spaces. One side of the earth was First Space, population five million. Its allotted time lasted from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock the next morning. Then the space went to sleep, and the earth flipped.
>
> The other side was shared by Second Space and Third Space. Twenty-five million people lived in Second Space, and their allotted time lasted from six o'clock on that second day to ten o'clock at night. Fifty million people lived in Third Space, allotted the time from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning, at which point First Space returned. Time had been carefully divided and parceled out to separate the populations: five million enjoyed the use of twenty-four hours, and seventy-five million enjoyed the next twenty-four hours. (Hao Jingfang 2016b, 230)

Introducing readers to an estranged version of contemporary Beijing, Hao Jingfang nevertheless foregrounds the prevailing injustice of contemporary China, creating a spatial manifestation of inequality in the form of a folded city. The protagonist of the story, Lao Dao 老刀, is a smuggler transgressing the borders of the three spaces, and his experience shows that the social hierarchy not only exists between different spaces but also prevails in all levels of the society – between men and women, and between different people with varying social status even within the same space. Lao Dao is not a rebel; he only wants to make a living. While he is acutely aware of the contrast between the privileged life in the First Space and the miserable situation in the Third Space, his observations lead to an acceptance of the status quo. The rationale for the existing three-space structure of society is deeply rooted in the cold calculations of the economic interests. The redistribution of time among the three spaces, while allocating much less time to the poor, serves to reduce the cost of living for those at a lower level of the society. Thus, the redistribution is a totalistic restructuring of life: space, time, wealth, and the feeling of happiness. "Downsizing 'time' and everything makes the poor content with what they have." Lao Dao hears such a cynical explanation from someone who has reached the First

Space by working their way up the social ladder – now physical in terms of the actual spatial relations. (Hao Jingfang 2016b, 255–256)

The systematic lack of justice and equality as well as the lack of room for conceiving alternatives in "Folding Beijing" may testify to Hao Jingfang's observation that "this is the tale of the fall of the last utopia." (Hao Jingfang 2020, 4) This story turns the utopian or dystopian space into a heterotopia, a form of space that appears to be other's but reflects our own reality, such as the First Space excluding those living in the Third Space but defining their life, and vice versa. At the same time, the folding Beijing establishes its heterotopian otherness to China's social reality both as a metonym and a textual reconstruction. Hao Jingfang's story, as a text manifesting space as a potential agent in defining otherness, showcases science fiction's capacity to turn itself into such a space that uses otherness or estrangement to represent a heterotopia that exists, but invisible, within our own world.

In another short story by Hao Jingfang, "Invisible Planets" (*Kanbujian de xingqiu* 看不見的星球, 2010) "I" am telling "you" stories about those wondrous, amazingly strange planets. For an entire afternoon, "I" am telling stories that make "you" wonder, laugh, and question whether "my" stories about these invisible planets are real or fabricated. The I-narrator then speaks directly to "you" the reader: "Do you understand? When I am done telling you these stories, when you're done listening to these stories, I am no longer I, and you are no longer you. In this afternoon we briefly merged into one. After this, you will always carry a bit of me, and I will always carry a bit of you, even if we both forget this conversation." (Hao Jingfang 2016c, 218) The above conversation can be viewed as an explanatory narrative about the relationship between science fiction and heterotopia. If heterotopia is those invisible planets, estranged and outside our daily experience, science fiction storytelling relates it to our own experience of reality. Heterotopia, which refers to the space that is folded and invisible in reality, becomes our own experience through science fiction. At the same time, it attains form as narrative, a linguistic practice that makes the invisible come to light.

Based on these descriptions, we may understand that science fiction can assume heterotopian otherness in two senses: first, science fiction creates imaginary space in a heterotopian relation to our reality, which broadens our vision of worlds beyond our own in both time and space and produces new knowledge and new ways of understanding our position in the world. Second, the science fictional text can turn itself into heterotopia in the sense that the text creates its own materiality in relation to our position on the time-space continuum in experiential reality. Recognizing the text itself as heterotopia establishes a metonymic relatedness between science fiction and the world. Because of science fiction, the world is whole: it bridges the gap between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, between I and you, and between words and worlds.

A fine example to illustrate the relationship between science fiction and heterotopia is Han Song's "The Hospital Trilogy."[11] Reading it now in 2020 further strengthens its heterotopian image in relation to our reality. Though completed and published before the pandemic, "The Hospital Trilogy" is an intriguing case that, first of all, establishes

[11] Han Song's "The Hospital Trilogy" consists of *Hospital* Yiyuan 醫院 (2016), *Exorcism* Qumo 驅魔 (2017), and *Dead Souls* Wangling 亡靈 (2018).

a heterotopian image of China and relates its invisible "other space" to everyday experience. The hospital is one of the original "heterotopias" that Michel Foucault mentions, as it represents a sort of crisis heterotopia, where the fate of our own world becomes undecided, uncertain (Michel Foucault 1998, 175–186). The image of the hospital in Han Song's trilogy alludes to a totalistic crisis in contemporary China, and the story of the hospital foregrounds those menacing moments, which appear abnormal, absurd, but integral to China's assumed "harmonious" society. The hospital functions as the mirror to reflect the "invisible" dark side of our reality. Yet the textuality of Han Song's trilogy itself becomes a heterotopia too. In the second volume, *Exorcism*, the patients are competing to tell "a good story about the hospital," a thinly veiled variation of Xi Jinping's calling for "telling a good China story," and such a story is all that doctors can use to treat patients as well as keep themselves committed to the cause, which is also the fundamental driving force in all three novels' plot development. (Han Song 2017, 141) Therefore, the protagonist is not only stuck in the senselessly inhuman situation of the hospital but also stuck in a repeated writing of eternal return. There is no exit from this endless story, while the characters, patients and doctors alike, are subject to ceaseless storytelling that leads to the same end again and again. The terrifying story of the hospital functions as a textual heterotopia to enlighten readers to see that our entire society has turned into a narrative that loses meanings.

Apocalyptic Heterotopia

To conclude my discussion on the relationships between science fiction and heterotopia, I'd like to mention three cases that all precisely point to the ontological significance of the literary form in shaping the topology of hope. The first is a series of very short, anecdote-like stories that Fei Dao 飛氘 (b. 1983) published recently, which appear like fragments of a fictive encyclopedia, memories and descriptions of things so removed from our reality that they seem to be pure fantasy. These stories read like experimental Borgesian writings about the future offspring of humankind living in diaspora throughout the galaxy, having by then lost their own history and forgotten their origin.

One of these stories, "One Kind of Melancholia Outside the Galaxy" *He wai youshang yizhong* 河外憂傷一種 (2019), describes an apocalyptic heterotopia: a time and place distant in the future and far away in deep space, long after humans die out. A strange, inexplicable "nostalgia" drives pilgrims to approach the so-called "completely inaccessible domain" *wanquan buke jiejin yu* 完全不可接近域, an area of the unknown and invisible; they are obsessed with a hauntingly beautiful myth of the "blue planet," but can never locate it in the unfathomable darkness of the domain. Some pilgrims suspect that "nostalgia" is a virtual memory implanted in their consciousness, and there is no "origin." Or the home planet has long perished; diaspora is their own reality. At a certain point, a "virtual cosmos" game player invents a simulated version of the cosmos, in which, one day, the dim light of the blue planet flickers. The entire community of pilgrims is shaken, and they come to behold the rebirth of their "home," but the blue dot already disappears without ever being observed … here the fragmented encyclopedia entry ends abruptly. An omnipotent narrator takes over and immediately zooms out to a much broader

view: further into the future, when the so-called interdimensional wanderers pass certain areas in the unfathomable darkness, their bodies are filled with warmth, hearts captured by pain and bittersweetness. These areas of darkness are dimensional fragments of the once-upon-a-time ruins of an older universe that has perished. They do not know what this feeling is, and they refrain from articulating words to describe it; and that silent tenderness conceives all the words and infinite expressions. Fei Dao's poetic, succinct narrative serves as a commentary on science fiction itself and even literature in general. The reality has long disappeared, and nostalgia, even if it is originally caused by the loss of a real object, has now become nostalgia for its own sake. In this enchanting description of the mythical feeling of melancholia, it is the myth and enchantment that causes the melancholia. When the world that is missed has lost itself in the emptiness, science fiction becomes the virtual embodiment of nostalgia. (Fei Dao 2020, 257–264)

This story, written by Fei Dao, an author based in Beijing, is nevertheless a piece of Sinophone science fiction, for it was commissioned by a magazine in Hong Kong and created with a self-awareness of its position in that context. The heterotopia, or the hetero-chronotope, that Fei Dao carefully builds in this text has even more complicated meanings in that cultural context: Is China the origin of nostalgia, or can it be a virtual form of an undetermined, uncertain territory? Furthermore, the story is also a practice of apocalyptic, posthuman writing. Fei Dao's narrative creates an open-ended scenario where the world as the real ceases existing and the world as a fabricated one comes into being after apocalypse. Virtual as it is, it is the only one that matters in the context of the story; the word is the world.

Hong Kong's own Dung Kai-cheung creates a remarkable apocalyptic heterotopia in his short stories and novels, an imaginary city with a distinct name: V-City, or Victoria, through which Dung projects Hong Kong's future after its apocalyptic endgame. V-City was first described in Dung's 1997 *Atlas* (*Dituji* 地圖集) as a "città invisibili" (Invisible City, with reference to Italo Calvino) that has disappeared and only come back to life through the work of future archaeologists. The entire book consists of short encyclopedia entries introducing the various aspects of the city through imaginative readings of maps and historical documents. It presents an acute feeling of "dèja disparu," as suggested by the cultural critic Ackbar Abbas, who published his landmark monograph on Hong Kong's 1997 syndrome, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, in the same year. In Dung's book, the impending endgame for Hong Kong may imply its handover back to China but may also point to an even larger change that has already been happening. The narrative defined by a futuristic perspective gives the city a form of being a lost place in a lost time, thus an estranging, imaginary place. Though the book is generally considered literary fiction, *Atlas*'s English version won the Science Fiction & Fantasy Translation Award in 2013.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Dung Kai-cheung has been devoted to writing a massive novel series, "Natural History" *Ziran shi* 自然史, which borrows more extensively from science fiction and new scientific theories (black hole, baby universe, dark matter) to create a unique narrative that renders the city first depicted in *Atlas* a metaphor reflecting the postmodern and posthuman conditions of the post-1997 future. The world that Dung builds in these novels can be viewed as a heterotopian image of Hong Kong, alluding to Hong Kong's colonial past, its problematic present, and its

postapocalyptic future. Its two-volume second part, *Histories of Time* (*Shijian fanshi* 時間繁史, 2007) creates an extremely complicated, half-metaphysical narrative that presents the city's (past and future) history in an uncanny image of time – time lost, retrieved, reimagined, and represented.

The novel contains self-reflections on writing, narrative, and literary imagination: the protagonist is a writer who is stuck in his own imagination, gradually losing his sense of reality. While he is stuck in melancholic self-isolation, the world that the novel depicts seems to have grown out of his speculations. At the center of this imaginary world is a seventeen-year-old girl, Virginia, whose heart is being replaced with a mechanical clock, which allows her to stay at the age of seventeen forever. In 2097, when Hong Kong is no more, the cyborg Virginia, still seventeen years old, moves into a library where she begins to rebuild the world, an entirely imaginary world, through composing "A Chronicle of a Mini-universe" *Xiaoyuzhou biannianshi*小宇宙編年史. (Dung Kai-cheung 2007 II, 83–84) At the very end of this long narrative, En'en 恩恩, the fictive protagonist of the writer's earlier novel, "experiences that marvelous moment, finding herself in the depth of imagination and feeling that infinite, abundant, already existing, baby universe." (Dung Kai-cheung 2007 II, 426) The novel ends with this moment: when reality vanishes, a new world is born; and this is a world built in imagination, a world of wonders, a world of words. This moment heightens the literariness of "heterotopia" as a virtually constructed, linguistically energized body of texts. It also marks the birth of wonder in a New-Baroque splendor, a new way of avant-gardism that writes science fictionality into literary fiction.

Dung Kai-cheung's peer in Taiwan, perhaps the most important novelist of this generation, Lo Yi-chin, has also consciously integrated science fictional elements into his experimentalist narratives over the past decade. References to Chinese new wave science fiction images and motifs have particularly filled his most recent three novels, *Daughter* (*Nü'er* 女兒, 2013), *Superman Kuang* (*Kuang chaoren* 匡超人, 2018), and *Mingchao* (明朝, 2019). All three make the science fictional world building a heterotopia to our reality. Lo's labyrinthine narrative presents an imaginary realm of speculations, metaphors, dismemberments, remembrances, and reconstructions of the "other" space in terms of identity, sexual transgression, diasporic experience, literary reference, and historical consciousness. A chapter from *Daughter*, titled "Science Fiction" (*kexue xiaoshuo* 科幻小說), can be read as a meta-science fictional text that attempts to create a literary experiment with science fiction text, just as science fiction experiments with world building. (Lo Yichun 2018b, 174–196) However, Lo's world building is not aimed at creating sublime cosmic images or abysmal dark images, as in Liu Cixin or Han Song, but rather is a literary self-conscious effort to render the narrative itself into a spectacle.

Superman Kuang borrows the mythical image of Monkey King to depict a strong sense of exclusion from history: the monkey king is cut off from his original story, displaced and exiled to an endless sequence of meaningless actions in the modern or future worlds, just like the I-narrator finds himself dislodged from his immediate reality. He is troubled by an unspeakable agony: there is a hole opening up on the skin of his genitals. To him, this hole in his body becomes a black hole that absorbs all his attention, his energies, worries, and visions. The hole becomes a heterotopia: not only a metaphor for the darkness of the world surrounding him and his contemporaries but also a virtual form for

him to explore an infinitely enlarged space that contains more possibilities than reality allows. It stands for the portal through which to enter a mythical world. The black hole corresponds to the apocalyptic moment: "those demons sleeping in the nightmares of the world are released when the sky showers burning bombs and hell erupts in fire." "This moment dislodged from the flux of time turns into an enormous hole whose immensity and magnitude are beyond grasp." (Lo Yichun 2018a, 284) The hole in the superman's body (his genitals) opens the gate to the darkness and stops time from flowing. Yet it also creates an infinite delay in face of the impending apocalypse. The superman, like Monkey King, has nowhere to settle with his pains and fears, but resides in this hole; and it is in this hole where literature begins, which imagines all the possible and impossible, converging in a heterotopia that gives form to all the shapeless, invisible demonic forces. The novel is not about any discernible event but a narrative that renders itself into the spectacle born with the hole. A virtual form of the world, a heterotopia that makes us see the invisible, Lo Yichin's "black hole" turns into a science fictional singularity.

In *Mingchao*, Lo Yichin directly engages in dialogue with Liu Cixin. He borrows from "The Three-Body Trilogy" the plot about the two-dimensional universe. The novel is loosely based on a world setting that suggests an impending endgame for the solar system. Scientists begin to train robots, preparing to launch them into deep space, with a hope that one day the robots will rebuild human civilization. The I-narrator is an engineer programming his robot with an entire Ming Dynasty encyclopedia. The novel is mainly focused on the detailed depictions of Ming literati culture, the knowledge and history of the Ming Dynasty, as explained to the robot, in parallel to the I-narrator's life in contemporary Taiwan. The distinction between reality and fiction often disappears, and the detailed stories about the Ming Dynasty are mingled with pre-told stories about the apocalyptic moment or its manifestation in the private life of the protagonist. Storytelling rather than stories is the central event in *Mingchao*: what the narrator is telling his robot is all that matters in this novel. It consists of repeated stories, extended storytelling about ill-fated writers, historical figures, emperors, and fictive characters.

All the storytelling, in defiance of the endgame, creates an immense surface world, a virtual world that does not have its depth in reality. It is best represented in the patterns on the surface of Ming porcelain: all the splendid, decadent, exotic, and erotic images point to a surface prosperity that hovers above an abysmal deep of emptiness. Lo's novel presents a counterimage to Liu Cixin's sublime aesthetics. The infinite immensity of the universe is actually not the magnetic center of Lo Yichin's narrative. Lo's storytelling is characterized by an obsession with the surface where the sublime collapses into decadence. Science fiction is appropriated as a device to postpone the arrival of the sublime, or the apocalypse, and it heightens the genre's significance as storytelling that is the only thing positioned to delay the endgame. In *Mingchao*, the science fictional textuality does not only become a metaphor for world building, it has become a spectacle itself. If Liu Cixin creates wonders through science fiction, Lo Yichin renders science fiction into a verbal wonder. *Mingchao*, which denotes both a past dynasty and "tomorrow," becomes a heterotopian time-space (a hetero-chronotope) that conceives more timelines and possibilities than predetermined. *Mingchao* is also the ultimate heterotopia to today, thus a revelation that directly speaks to us.

Conclusion

Modern philosophers such as Karl Mannheim, Paul Ricoeur, and Fredric Jameson have all designed different theories to separate utopia from ideology: if ideology mainly functions as a means of social integration, "utopia, in counterpoint, is the function of social subversion." (Lyman Tower Sargent 2017, 31) Particularly meaningful to contemporary Chinese intellectuals regarding utopian thinking is perhaps the free floating of utopia when dislodged from ideology, which allows for identifying insurgent utopian impulses for "social subversion" or social criticism instead of further confining utopianism in a rigid ideological framework. In particular, contemporary Chinese science fiction, which is the focus of this study, is good at creating alternative world images that reflect upon and recapitulate the contemporary version of a Leviathan technocratic state as a restrictive, coercive one-nation utopia.

Both utopian and dystopian visions can lead to social interventions, with a hope for alternatives as the fundamental inspiration for critical engagements with reality. In the early period of Chinese science fiction's development, utopian visions poignantly pointed to the inadequacies in reality while outlining the alternatives as means of social reform. In the contemporary context, utopian impulse also leads to the discontent with the social reality and dystopia nourishes profound questioning of the prevailing ideology, which result in either direct or disguised protests against the totalizing, hegemonic grand narrative of utopian China.

In summary, Contemporary Chinese science fiction writers increasingly cast doubt on the earlier utopian themes, and the total control, the unlimited power of the state, and combination of power and technology are some themes constantly emerging in the novels by Chan Koonchung, Han Song, Liu Cixin, Bao Shu, Hao Jingfang, and Ma Boyong etc. More often, contemporary science fictional depictions of the futuristic collaboration of totalitarianism and technocracy tend to foreground the systematic elimination of "all too personal, all too human" elements for the sake of achieving lofty, sublime goals; such plot design has enabled the dark dystopian shadows to eclipse utopia.

In the emerging Sinophone science fiction, Dung Kai-cheung and Lo Yichun have particularly experimented with a new writing practice of heterotopia. Their efforts have shifted the utopian impulse from the social engagement to a poetic construction of verbal wonders. For these writers, science fiction has become a meta-textual manifestation of storytelling, where the topology of hope becomes a virtual form that is dislodged from reality but keeps the utopian vision alive in a world of words.

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